

THE TENNESSEAN

Williamson Countians put premium on fitness

BY JENNIFER BROOKS • THE TENNESSEAN • AUGUST 8, 2010

It's a sweltering late afternoon in Brentwood, too hot to breathe without air conditioning, never mind throw on bike shorts and hit the trails like these people are doing.

Around and around the trails that circle the Williamson County Indoor Sports Complex, fitness coach Stephen Taylor is leading a pack of cyclists on a training exercise in the sweltering August heat. Inside the sports complex are air conditioning, a 50-foot pool, room after room of gleaming fitness equipment and dozens more Williamson County residents exercising.

This is Williamson County, and that's what you do after work.

"I hate to refer to the culture of a place and say that determines whether you're going to exercise or not, but say no one in your family exercises, say they think it's a stupid thing to do, they think it's a waste of time, they think the clothes look silly. That's going to affect how you feel about exercise," said Taylor, who coaches amateur endurance athletes in the Metro area.

Williamson County boasts the lowest obesity rate and the healthiest population in an otherwise dimly unhealthy state. It also is the wealthiest county, with the highest population of college-educated residents, all factors that experts say factor into people's food and exercise choices.

For Brentwood mother of four Elizabeth Rich, exercise isn't optional — it's something her family simply does, the way the kids know they have to go to school. When the family was younger, and her husband was a cash-strapped med school student, the county's vast recreational system made it easy for her to put the babies in a stroller and exercise for free.

"We make time for it every day," she said. "It's something any mom can do. You can find the time to take care of yourself, and when you're taking care of yourself, you'll be able to take care of your kids."



Fitness coach Stephen Taylor works with his triathlon team Friday at the Williamson County Sports Complex in Franklin.

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44th in U.S. group

This is a county of gourmet grocery stores, healthy restaurants mixed in with the fast-food eateries, and fitness clubs. The county is crisscrossed with a network of bike paths, walking paths, county and municipal parks, ball fields, and gleaming public recreation centers that dwarf most private gyms in the region.

"Williamson County commissioners place a high priority on parks and recreation facilities," said Kerri Hudson, public information officer for Williamson County Parks and Recreation. "I think it's part of the way of life here."

Williamson County may be Tennessee's fittest county, but at least a quarter of its population is still obese. In fact, when the University of Wisconsin ranked the healthiest counties in each state, Williamson ranked 44th out of the group — the obesity rate in Douglas County, Colo., by comparison, is 16 percent. Chittenden, Vt., the nation's healthiest county, has an obesity rate of 19 percent.

But Williamson also has the resources to help its residents. There's the Scale-Down program, which offers weight loss support through the county recreation centers, and regular healthy living programs, like September's Healthy Cooking classes. The recreation centers, which any county resident can visit for \$3, offer year-round fitness classes, personal trainers and wellness counseling.